

# Deep Disappointment, Glorious Surprise

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[ 0 : 00 ] Christ is risen. Amen. If you have a Bible, turn with me to John chapter 11. We'll also put the verses up on the screen so you can follow along that way.

I'm going to begin by reading the first 16 verses of John chapter 11, the beginning of the story of a man named Lazarus.

So join me as we read along. John 11, beginning at verse 1. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary, and her sister Martha.

It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters said to him, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill.

But when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

[ 1 : 09 ] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this, he said to the disciples, let us go to Judea again. The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you. Are you going there again? Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours in the day?

If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles because the light is not in him. After saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died.

And for your sake, I am glad that I wasn't there so that you may believe, but let us go to him. So Thomas called the twins, said to his fellow disciples, let us also go, that we may die with him.

[ 2 : 18 ] So one unavoidable part of being human is that often our expectations don't line up with reality. And sometimes this mismatch between expectations and reality results in disappointment.

Last summer, my wife and I built a fire pit in our backyard, like many other people in 2020. And initially, I thought this will be great. Now I'll be able to invite people over even through the winter, even through the pandemic.

So one evening in mid-November, Brian Kunzman came over. He and I were going to meet and talk. And I said, well, you know, it's supposed to be a cold night, but I think I can build a pretty good fire. You're from Chicago.

I'm from New England. We can do this. Well, unfortunately, it had recently rained. So the ground under the fire pit was wet. Some of the wood was also wet.

My skills at building fires in our indoor fireplace did not translate as well as I hoped to our outdoor fire pit. Brian was a good sport. We had a good conversation. But afterwards, I was so cold, I could not get to sleep for two more hours.

[ 3 : 23 ] And so I concluded I should not put anyone else in the church through that experience. And so the fire pit went unused for the rest of the winter. Now, in the scope of this past year, that is a fairly trivial example.

But for many of us, this past year has brought with it a long list of disappointments, both trivial and more profound. We might say hopeful expectations that were crushed by harsh reality.

But thankfully, disappointment is not the only way that our expectations don't line up with reality.

Sometimes the mismatch between our expectations and reality results in a glorious surprise.

For the last seven years or so, my family has had a small fig tree in the corner of our living room.

My wife, Jane, has faithfully watered and tended this plant, moving it outdoors during the warmer

months and in the colder months, positioning it by a south-facing window to maximize sunlight. I can take no credit for the existence, growth, or health of this fig tree or any of our other houseplants. Now, at one point, the fig tree disappeared for a few months, which was okay with me because Jane gave it away to someone who admired it.

[ 4 : 41 ] But then there was a clearance sale at a garden store and another fig tree showed up. Again, I'm not naturally into houseplants, but there wasn't space for anything else in that corner of the living room, so I had no good reason to object.

For the last seven years, I have had zero expectation that either of our fig trees would ever yield any actual figs. After all, some fig trees planted in the ground take eight to ten years before they yield any fruit.

And I've always been skeptical of the idea that a fruit-bearing tree could actually exist in our living room. Until last week.

One evening, Jane asked me, Did you see the fig tree? I said, What about the fig tree? She said, Look at the fig tree. And there they were.

Two little hard green nubs protruding from the branch. Unmistakably figs. New life and fruit emerging where I never expected to see it.

[ 5 : 50 ] My meager expectations were gloriously surprised by a merciful reality. This morning, I want us to consider two stories from the Gospel of John, where people are first disappointed, where their hopeful expectations crash into a harsh reality.

But then, they are gloriously surprised. Their meager expectations are surprised by a merciful reality. The first story we're looking at is the story of Lazarus, which I've read the beginning of. The second is the story of Jesus' own death and resurrection, which we heard earlier in the service. The story of Lazarus comes right in the middle of the book of John.

And the story of Jesus' own death and resurrection is the climax and conclusion of the Gospel itself. Now, these stories are connected to each other in a couple of ways. There's a chronological connection.

John tells us in chapter 11, verse 53, that the raising of Lazarus sets into motion the chain of events that result in Jesus' own execution. But there's also a thematic connection in that the raising of Lazarus from the dead is a preview of Jesus' own resurrection from the dead.

[ 7 : 03 ] And throughout the history of the church, these two stories have been closely connected and sort of woven together in a variety of ways. So I want to look at them in parallel this morning.

So first, let's consider how both of these stories begin with disappointment. Consider the beginning of the account of Lazarus, right? What happens? Well, first thing we learn is that this dear brother, and most likely he was a relatively young guy, became seriously ill.

And you know, this isn't just an unknown individual. Most of the people whom Jesus healed during his earthly ministry, their names are not recorded for us. But this is someone who Jesus knew well. Four times this story emphasizes Jesus' particular affection and love for this family, for Mary and Martha and Lazarus. In verse 3, they say, Lord, the one you love is ill.

Verse 5, it says, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Verse 11, Jesus calls Lazarus our friend. Verse 36, though the mourners at his tomb say, see how he loved him.

[ 8 : 15 ] You see, these siblings had welcomed Jesus into their house. They had listened to him teach. They had shared meals with him. They had developed an emotional and relational connection with Jesus.

And so they sent a request to Jesus on their brother's behalf when he became seriously ill. Now, in ancient Middle Eastern culture, if you were making a request of an honored person, you would make your request as indirectly as possible.

And so that's how you showed respect to someone. So they don't say, Jesus, come. That would be sort of like ordering him around. They simply say, Lord, the one you love is ill.

They give him all the information he needs to know. But the meaning is very clear. They wouldn't send such a message unless it was an urgent and important need. The message is come.

But then we hear that Jesus delayed. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

[ 9 : 20 ] What? How does that make any sense? Why would Jesus delay without any apparent explanation or reason? Delaying for two whole days would appear to dishonor the family and minimize their suffering.

How could Jesus delay be motivated by his love? And then we see the perspective of Jesus' disciples, starting in verse 7. Two days later, Jesus says to his disciples, Okay, let's head to Judea. And immediately, his disciples objected because the last time Jesus was in Judea, the religious leaders had concluded that he should be executed. That he was worthy of death.

There was hostility and danger facing him in Judea. And so the disciples pushed back on him. You know, is it really worth it to travel to attend a funeral if you would be putting your own life and maybe others' lives around you at risk?

That's a hard question. So the disciples find all the reasons they can to say, Really? No, we shouldn't go.

[10:30] Until finally, Thomas says, Okay, let's go with him so that we'll die with him rather than leave him alone. Thomas may have been a pessimist, but he was not a coward.

And as we'll see later, he was absolutely right that for Jesus and his disciples, going to Lazarus' funeral meant walking into a dangerous and legitimately hostile environment.

So Jesus' friend got sick. Then Jesus delayed with no explanation. Then Jesus' friend died. Then Jesus intentionally led his disciples into a hostile and dangerous environment. That's where the story begins.

Disappointment on all sides. Hopeful expectations crushed by harsh reality. Can you identify with any of those experiences?

A friend or family member becoming seriously ill? A prayer that seemingly goes unanswered? A loved one lost? Unexpected hostility?

[11:39] Or heightened danger? Well, just a week or two later, Jesus himself would be arrested and condemned to death, mocked and beaten and crucified, and you can only imagine the disappointment that his disciples faced then.

Many of them had hoped that he would be the long-awaited Messiah, the deliverer of Israel. But now he was rejected by many of Israel's own leaders and condemned by the Roman authorities. To die a cruel and shameful death. How do we respond to disappointment when hopeful expectations are crushed by harsh reality?

Well, some of Jesus' disciples responded by lashing out at others. When Jesus got arrested in chapter 18, Simon Peter drew his sword and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. fear. Sometimes that's how we deal with disappointment or unmet expectations. We angrily lash out at people around us, even if they may not have been the direct cause of our disappointment.

[12:53] The high priest's servant certainly was not the ringleader of the crowd that arrested Jesus. We can lash out with words or even with physical actions.

During the last year, instances of uncontrolled rage and physical violence have significantly increased, sometimes with tragic consequences. You see, lashing out in anger is a very natural response to disappointment, but it can cause great destruction, even if it's only through words without any physical element involved.

You know, we can also respond to disappointment not by lashing out at others, but instead by withdrawing into ourselves. And actually, Peter exemplifies this too.

Just a few hours after he had lashed out in anger, he withdrew in fear. When Jesus was on trial, it says Peter stood in the courtyard of the high priest warming himself by a charcoal fire because it was a cold night.

And then when people kept on asking him, aren't you one of Jesus' disciples? He kept on pretending that he didn't even know what they were talking about. Of course, that's another way that we sometimes deal with our disappointment, by withdrawing from our responsibilities, by retreating into self-pity, by prioritizing our own comfort above all else, just trying to stay warm.

[14:34] You know, when you consider the disappointments that you've experienced lately, do you notice either of both of those tendencies? Either to lash out at others or to withdraw into yourself.

You see, the invitation that both of these stories extend to us is instead of doing either of those things, the invitation that these stories extend is to go to Jesus and to stay with Jesus even in the midst of our deepest disappointments.

That's what a small group of Jesus' followers did when he was crucified. It's primarily a group of women. John 19, 25 says, Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene and the disciple whom he loved.

That's John's way of referring to himself, the author of the gospel, the disciple whom Jesus loved. But these faithful few saw their Lord and teacher condemned and crucified.

They saw him take his last breath. They saw his body be wrapped up and buried in a tomb. They didn't understand why it was all happening. But they stood there.

[15:49] They stayed with Jesus all the way to the end. They watched him. They listened to his last words. That's also what Mary and Martha did.

In the story of Lazarus, when Jesus arrived too late to save their brother from dying. Verse 20, When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out and met him even before Jesus entered the village.

Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Later on in verse 32, her sister Mary says exactly the same thing.

Lord, if you would have been here, my brother wouldn't have died. You see, Mary and Martha brought their disappointment, their frustration, their unmet expectations, and unfulfilled longings to Jesus, even when it seemed like Jesus might have been the cause of those disappointments. They opened up their hearts to him. They lamented the loss that they had experienced. They didn't pretend that everything was just okay and I'm just fine. And yet, they didn't abandon their trust in Jesus even in the middle of their disappointment.

[17:03] Now, Mary and Martha were quite different in their personalities. Martha was assertive, active, and confrontational. So she took initiative, she went out to meet Jesus and initiated the conversation.

Mary was the opposite. She was quiet, reflective, and responsive. She stayed in the house. But notice how Jesus engaged Mary and Martha in such a thoughtful and loving way.

He knew each of them, he knew each of them in their individual personalities. Jesus responded to Martha by engaging her in conversation, by telling her that one day her brother Lazarus would rise again.

And even more than that, he told her that he himself was the resurrection and the life. He challenged and comforted Martha with bold claims and precious truths.

But with Mary, Jesus took a different approach. In verse 28, Jesus specifically asked to see Mary. Martha was the one who had come out to him.

[18:13] They had a conversation outside the village. And then Jesus specifically asked for Mary. You see, Jesus sees us in our disappointments. Even if nobody else does.

Even if we don't reach out to him, he reaches out to us. When we are quietly suffering, when we are emotionally fragile, Jesus does not overlook us.

And he does not ignore us. In love, he takes initiative to come and find us and to draw us out and to listen to us. And that's what Jesus does when Mary comes to Jesus.

He doesn't say a lot. He just asks, where's the grave? So he can go and weep with her there.

In the face of death, Jesus felt grief and outrage and compassion all at the same time. Jesus felt for her and he felt with her. You see, Jesus meets us in the midst of our disappointments.

[19:18] And even when we don't understand his ways and even when our disappointments seem to be caused by his own sovereign decisions, he summons us to go to him and stay with him.

That's where both of these stories begin. With great disappointment. But that's not where both of these stories end. Because both of these stories end in a glorious surprise.

And what we see in both of these stories is that everyone who goes to Jesus and stays with Jesus through their disappointments is gloriously surprised by Jesus in the end.

Verse 38 of chapter 11, then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb of Lazarus. It was a cave and a stone lay against it.

Jesus said, take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odor for he has been dead for days.

[20:27] You see, nobody was expecting Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead. Not even energetic go-getter Martha who had just proclaimed her faith that Jesus was the son of God who had come into the world.

Now, like most other Jews in her time, Martha believed that at the end of history all the righteous, God would raise the righteous dead to life at the end of time.

Including her brother. But Martha wasn't expecting a preview of that day right in front of her eyes. Martha knew that dead bodies normally start to decompose and stink after just two or three days.

And this is day four. You see, in the ancient Jewish culture, they didn't embalm dead bodies in order to try to slow the process of decay. No, they simply washed the body, sometimes anointed it with oil or spices, and then wrapped it in a large sheet with a cloth over the face and the hands and feet bound.

And then they would place the body in a tomb and then a year later, after the body was completely decayed and only bones were left, the family would come and retrieve the bones and bury them somewhere else so that the tomb could be reused for someone else.

[ 21 : 47 ] That was the normal procedure of burial in those days. But Jesus had come into the world to do something that was not just normal.

Jesus had come into the world to reverse the cycle of sin and death and display the glory and life-giving power of the creator God himself. In John chapter 10, Jesus said this, the thief comes to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

And that's exactly what Jesus does here. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out! The good shepherd calling one of his own sheep by name.

And then verse 44, it says, the man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. He was probably awkwardly shuffling, blindly feeling his way along, but most definitely he was alive again.

[ 23 : 02 ] Consider how surprising that would have been for all involved. Right? Mary and Martha had sent to Jesus in their time of need. They might have been puzzled, even troubled by his delay or seeming reluctance to respond promptly to their request, but then they were gloriously surprised by a deeper understanding of Jesus' character because they saw that Jesus not only had power to heal people from sickness, but he even had the power to call the dead to life.

You see, when we stay with Jesus through our disappointment, we often end up with a clearer and more profound vision of his character in the end. Or consider the experience of Lazarus.

Perhaps he had hoped that Jesus would arrive in time to heal him or at least to have a parting visit with him. But he felt his life ebbing away and Jesus never came. But then the next thing he heard was Jesus' own voice calling him by name and raising him to life again.

And that's the promise that the Bible extends to everyone who believes in Jesus. That after we die, that the next voice we will hear is the voice of Jesus calling us by our name and calling us to himself.

You see, what a glorious surprise for those who had experienced such deep disappointment. Now, I want to pause a moment because I want to address the question that I'm sure some of you are thinking.

[ 24 : 35 ] Which is, okay, that's an interesting story. Is there any reason to believe that such things actually happened? I mean, this is more than a report of a near-death experience.

I don't know about you, but over the years I've had a handful or two of people who have told me that they have literally died and come back to life. Most of them I didn't know very well, so it has honestly been hard for me to evaluate their claims.

But none of them claimed to have been dead for four days straight. It was almost always a few hours and maybe they were already in a coma in the ICU or something like that.

Maybe a day. Never four. Right? After four it's pretty clear. So, what do we make of this story? Because it's claiming something pretty bold. You know, many modern skeptics assume that the miracle stories in the New Testament simply couldn't have happened. But many of the earliest opponents of Christianity did not share that assumption.

[ 25 : 48 ] So, some of the earliest opponents of Christianity accused Jesus of practicing evil magic in order to lead people astray. So, this accusation comes up in the writings of Celsus, a second century pagan opponent of Christianity as well as in the Jewish Talmud.

the New Testament Gospels also record Jesus' opponents making similar accusations on multiple occasions. But notice, all these early opponents of Christianity did not deny that Jesus did miracles. They did not deny that Jesus had healed the sick or even raised the dead to life. In fact, they implicitly admitted it. They admitted that he had done marvelous deeds, things that were not normally explainable, that he had exhibited supernatural powers.

They didn't question that at all. They simply accused him of getting his supernatural powers from evil forces rather than from God. So, if even Jesus' opponents acknowledged his miracles, perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to simply dismiss the possibility.

Now, other people in the modern world have been skeptical of this story in particular for the reason that it is only recorded in John, which is the last of the four Gospels to be written.

[ 27 : 15 ] Lazarus isn't even named in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. And so, some scholars say this indicates that this story was made up long after the fact it's just a legend.

However, if this story actually happened the way John says it did, there's a very good reason why it would not have been included in the earliest New Testament Gospels, and it's this.

After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, Lazarus immediately became a wanted man. John 12 verse 10 says, the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well because on account of him, many people were going away and believing in Jesus.

Now, Lazarus lived in Bethany, just two miles outside of Jerusalem, where Jesus himself was killed. And if Lazarus continued to live there, which we assume he would have, his story could not have been publicly and widely proclaimed in the local area without at the same time putting him, as well as his sisters, in grave danger from both Jewish and Roman opponents of the early Christian movement.

According to the book of Acts, the first Christian martyr, first Christian who was killed for his profession of faith, was Stephen, and he was killed in Jerusalem. You see, Jerusalem was not exactly a safe space for the early Christians.

[ 28 : 45 ] So the Christians in Jerusalem had to be very careful who they put forward as public witnesses in order to avoid unnecessarily exposing some of their key members to mortal danger.

Now, most scholars think that Mark was the first of the New Testament Gospels to be written, and Luke and Matthew build off Mark to some extent, and that Mark's narrative of the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection was built from an earlier narrative and what had been handed down and what was publicly read and commonly told within the church in Jerusalem.

So in that case, it wouldn't be surprising at all that Lazarus is not named in the earlier Gospels. God's name. Because if they named him, if they were publicly proclaiming his story to anyone and everyone and everywhere, that would immediately put him in grave danger, as well as his family.

There are other examples, by the way, that fit this pattern, too. In fact, there are three other instances during the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, three other sort of sensitive incidents, where Mark describes an action anonymously, but John tells us who did it. One of those is when Peter hacks off the ear of the high priest's servant. Mark doesn't tell us either of their names. John tells us both of their names. And again, one of those incidents that, if you were named publicly, could have got you into trouble.

[ 30 : 20 ] By the time John was writing later in the first century, at least two things had changed. Number one, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D. and that changed the religious power structure in the city.

Second, most likely Lazarus would have died of natural causes by this time. So either way, when John was writing, there would have been no further need to protect him from harm by keeping his story on the down low.

The point is, just because this story only appears in John, that's no reason to believe that it was merely invented, or a legend invented long after the fact.

One final detail, in 1887, archaeologists found a first century burial cave near the town of Bethany with the names Mary, Martha, and Eleazar inscribed on it.

Lazarus is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar. Mary, Martha, Eleazar. Now, that in itself doesn't prove that the story happened, but it does demonstrate that the details, the names, the location, the burial customs, all of those are entirely plausible.

[ 31 : 30 ] But you know, the greatest miracle that the New Testament records is not the raising of Lazarus, who would one day die again, but the story of Lazarus only points forward toward the greater miracle of the resurrection of Jesus, who was raised from the dead, never to die again.

And again, after the great disappointment of Jesus being crucified, the resurrection was a complete surprise to every last one of Jesus' followers. None of them were expecting it.

Notice how they reacted. In that story we read earlier from John chapter 20, the first person who goes to the tomb is Mary Magdalene. She was one of the women who had stayed with Jesus to the

end, who had seen him die and be buried.

And when she came to the tomb early on Sunday morning and found it empty, she did not immediately conclude that Jesus had been resurrected. She didn't say, oh yes, this is what we were hoping and dreaming all along, our dreams have now come true.

No. She ran away completely distraught. She thought that someone had stolen Jesus' body and carried it away.

[ 32 : 42 ] They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they placed him. It was only later on when Jesus appeared to her in person and called her by her name that she recognized him as the resurrected Lord.

Of course, the next person who sees the empty tomb was Simon Peter and John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. And Peter noticed a fascinating detail. The linen cloths that Jesus' body had been wrapped in were lying there and the face cloth which had been on Jesus' head was folded up in a place by itself.

You see, this is one of the main differences between Lazarus who was resuscitated and Jesus who was resurrected. You see, unlike Lazarus, Jesus did not come out of the tomb awkwardly shuffling and blindly feeling his way along.

No, God had raised Jesus from the dead never to die again. His body that was crucified was decisively transformed into a new and glorious body.

It's as if Jesus got up and left his grave clothes behind like a caterpillar that has turned into a butterfly, leaves its cocoon behind. He neatly folded his laundry and went on his way as the triumphant king who had once for all conquered sin and death.

[ 34 : 00 ] And then later on in chapter 20, Thomas comes on the scene. Remember Thomas? The coward, not coward, the courageous pessimist? Everything's going to go wrong, but I'll stick with you to the end anyway.

Well, guess what? When the other disciples had seen the risen Jesus, Thomas says, I won't believe it till I see it. Here's the point.

The early Christians, none of them, they were not a bunch of naive and gullible people who were just about to believe anything. But they became convinced. They were not expecting to be gloriously surprised on that first Easter morning, but Jesus broke through their meager expectations and surprised them with his merciful reality.

Now, these days, Jesus isn't making physical appearances on earth, not in the same way that he was in the 40 days after his resurrection, but let me tell you this.

Jesus still breaks through our meager expectations with his merciful reality. Jesus still gloriously surprises us.

[ 35 : 11 ] As you look back on your darkest days and on your deepest disappointments, can you see the light of Jesus breaking through to meet you in unexpected ways?

You see, quite often Jesus first brings us to a place of disappointment where our hopeful or perhaps naive expectations crash into a harsh reality.

But in that very place of disappointment and anguish and even death, he calls us to himself, to go to him, to stay with him, and he doesn't end there because he continues to bring life out of death and glorious surprise out of deep disappointment.

Friends, this is what Easter is all about, that everyone who goes to Jesus and stays with Jesus through their disappointment will be gloriously surprised in the end.

Let us pray. Father God, we thank you for the honesty of your disciples that we read about in the Bible, for Mary and Martha's honesty in going to you with their disappointments and laments, for the honesty of the disciples in voicing their skepticism and hesitation when they first saw the empty tomb or encountered you, their risen Lord.

[ 36 : 54 ] Lord, give us the courage to come to you honestly. We pray that as they did, pray that we would take seriously their testimony and the testimony of Christian believers through the ages that you are the God of glorious surprises.

Lord, we pray that we would draw near to you in our disappointments. We pray that you would gloriously surprise us with your merciful reality, that you would break through our limited and meager expectations of you, that we would experience your life-giving power in our souls, in our bodies, in our lives, in our relationships, and that we might carry that with us into the world and wherever we go.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.